DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 963 CS 212 712

AUTHOR Kelly, Ernece B.
TITLE Spike Lee, Short Films and Social Issues in the English Classroom.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (80th, Atlanta, GA, November 16-21, 1990).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Classroom Techniques; *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Current Events; English Instruction; Films; *Film Study; *Multimedia Instruction; Popular Culture; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; *Social Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Film Viewing

ABSTRACT

In the past few years many movies have addressed social issues such as AIDS, parental estrangement, aging, battered women and children, and racism. Teachers of teenagers can capitalize on these kinds of serious films in two ways: by assuming that students have thought about some serious issues and by building on that assumption. Three movies of Spike Lee, "She's Gotta Have It," "School Daze," and "Do the Right Thing" are examples of such films. Issues revolving around sexual and social relations abound in "She's Gotta Have It." "School Daze" embraces weighty political, racial, and sexual issues. And within the straightforward narrative of "Do the Right Thing" are questions of community control, racial prejudice, parental responsibility, and police brutality. The content of film can be dealt with in various ways. For example, full-length feature films can be treated as literature in the classroom, short films may be used as complements to the reading experience, and fact-based films on social issues can be studied in classes with a research component. (TD)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

Dr. Ernece B. Kelly
POB 648
Corona-Elmhurst, NY 11373

ED329963

# Spike Lee, Short Films and Social Issues in the English Classroom

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS212712

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ernece B. Kelly

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dr. Ernece B. Kelly
POB 648
Corona-Elmhurst, NY 11373

**Spike Lee, Short Films and Social Issues in the English Classroom**

While some teenagers flock to films about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and the latest sequel of Freddy-the-hacker-Krueger in Halloween Part Twelve, others are going to film more centered in social realities.

In the last three years there's been a spate of commercial films as well as made-for-television movies addressing issues such as AIDS, parental estrangement, aging, battered women and children, and racism, all accessible to teens.

Although melodrama and sentimentality mar some, others are outstanding in both honest treatment of problems and maintenance of dramatic values. Exceptional films in 1990 alone include Quincy Jones' autobiographical, Listen Up!, Carrie Fisher's story in Postcards From the Edge, Andre's Mother a television production about the impact of a gay man's death from AIDS, and Avalon a film about a European immigrant's life in Baltimore.

To this list can be added the film work of Spike Lee, notable for his explicit treatment of social issues. His first commercial film, She's Gotta Have It looked at a young woman's sexual freedom; School Daze examined both the horrors of fraternity hazing and rivalries stemming from (skin) color differences. While Lee's 1989

CS212712

Do the Right Thing centered on issues of race hatred and community control.

Teenagers, young adults, and pre-teens who **should** be excluded from his films by the R ratings are drawn to them, no doubt, by his consistent casting of young actors and actresses, his pulsing musical sound tracks, and his dialogue which is always at the cutting-edge of hip, urban slang. Lee combines all these elements with a seriousness of purpose reflected in his response to my question posed to him at his production studio, Forty Acres and a Mule. I asked what kind of filmmaker he was and he answered, "...almost everything we do is against the tide. Very few films have the kind of depth to Black people that we have...."

As a consequence, when our students experience Lee's films, they're getting more than an entertaining hour. They are also being challenged to, first, look at certain social morés and/or problems; and, second, they're being invited to think about these matters and, in some cases, encouraged to take sides. Lee is quoted in Harper's Magazine in 1988: "I present problems...we intended...to provoke discussion which is what it's [his film] doing. That was our task. And we performed it. If we don't address problems, they don't get talked about and solved."

Teachers can capitalize on these kinds of serious films in at least two ways: by first assuming that many of our students have thought about some serious issues. And, second, by building on that. But before moving to pedagogy, a brief analysis of Lee's films, with special attention to the social issues embedded in them.

Lee's first commercial film, She's Gotta Have It chronicled the

adventures of Nola Darling as she adroitly balanced her social and sexual needs among three men. (Actually this was the second time Lee focused on man-woman relations with the woman at the center. His short film made while still a student at New York University's Film School entitled Sarah was about a divorced mother of a small boy who is painstakingly considering her male options for marriage.)

As perhaps the first film directed by an African-American male in which an African-American woman is cast as the central character, Lee has avoided a common criticism of feminists about Hollywood films and that is of the male gaze relegating women to sex objects and limiting their presence to the edges of the screen as minor characters.

For in She's Gotta Have It, Nola Darling is the centerpiece. Though striking in appearance, she neither conforms to an African-American nor a Euro-American standard of beauty. But it's her behavior not her appearance which draws our attention although one is as non-conforming as the other.

Nola is involved sexaully with three men. Each knows of the others, so deception is neither an issue nor a source of dramatic tension. Instead what holds audiences is the question of which of them she'll choose: Mars Blackmon the Brooklyn B-boy who wears his Adidas to bed; Jamie Overstreet the romantic, monogamist who recites awful poetry, or Greer Childs whose Hollywood matinee star qualities power his overweaning egotism.

The almost hermetically sealed world of Nola is one of sexual and social relations in which the usual roles are reversed. For here the woman enjoys sexual freedom and the man, Jamie who eventually wins her, demands monogamy. Along the way, lesbianism and materialism are introduced and rejected by her.

Perhaps the most disturbing issue raised by the film is Jamie's rape of Nola. After this brutal act--one which is totally out-of-character for Jamie and the overall tone of the movie--Nola chooses him as her exclusive lover. Thus the issue of date rape is raised in this unsettling manner.

In short, issues revolving around sexual and social relations abound in She's Gotta Have It. And we do our students an injustice if we strict them to the clichéd level of writing about what they did or didn't do on their summer vacations!

Lee's second commercial film, School Daze released in 1988, not only raises a different set of issues but does so in a radically different format. This film sparkles with song and dance numbers. However, in contradistinciton to the conventional fluffy content of musicals, it embraces weighty political, racial, and sexual issues, ending with the provocative and ambiguous chant, "Wake up! Wake up!"

Lee opens the film with a confrontation between two leaders on the campus of the all-Black Mission College. Dap, the leader of the anti-apartheid movement,is addressing a rally that is effectively interrupted by Julian, a.k.a. Big Brother Almighty leading his eight slavish Gamma Phi Gamma pledges smack into the rally. So, the groundwork is laid for the larger conflict between the students aspiring to assimilate to such an extreme extent that they're referred to as Wannabees and those students whose strong Afrocentricism draws them to demonstrate for the rights of Black South Africans.

Close on the heels of the Gamma men are their female counterparts, the Gamma Rays! Their groupie-like relationship to the men is both anachronistic and inconsistent with their apparent intellectual equality. Not only are these women willing to assume subservient

social roles but even their sexual relations are determined by their men, a pattern which ultimately leads to the movie's most revolting scene in which Jane Toussaint consents to have sexual relations with someone she dislikes in order to prove her love for Julian.

Other issues crowd the film: class conflicts between college students and townspeople who resent their perceived superiority; hazing (which incidentally was effectively banned a short while ago by the Pan Hellenic Council which regulates Black fraternities and sororities), and freedom of speech on campus.

By 1989, Spike Lee had developed a diverse audience which anxiously awaited the film rumored to be his most political to date. And Do the Right Thing did not disappoint. For wrapped within the folds of the straight-forward narrative about Mookie, the pizza deliveryman for Sal's Famous Pizzeria, are heady questions of community control, racial prejudice, parental responsibility, and police brutality.

Incidents peculiar to New York City but which are nonetheless a microcosm of circumstances in other parts of the country surface as political graffiti. For example, in one scene, "Dump Koch" is spray painted on a background wall, and in another, Mookie and his sister Jade argue in front of the scrawled statement: "Tawana Told the Truth" a reference to the case of Tawana Brawley a young Black girl from upstate New York whose case was dismissed by the state although she and others testified that she had been brutalized and raped by several white men.

Another local issue,but one institutionalized throughout the U.S., soon emerges and it's that one of community control. Sal's pizza joint is adorned with photos of Italian-American singers and movie

stars reflecting his ethnic origins. This is an affront to the character Buggin' Out who tries unsuccessfully to organize a boycott. Yet another aspect of community control--or lack of it--is expressed around the Korean market which occupies a space long vacant. It too is resented by some in the community and prompts one character to say, "I'll be one happy fool to see us have our own business right here. Yes sir. I'd be the first in line to spend the little money I got."

Other of Lee's political referencing operates on a more explicit national level. The philosophies of Dr. King and of Malcolm X are visually brought into the film several times by a most unlikely character, Smiley the deaf mute who constantly carries pictures of the two leaders with him. Operating with a similar message but on an aural level is Radio Raheem who wears a pair of brass knuckles with LOVE and HATE spelled out. Lee's story stops for Raheem's telling of the story of the fight between these two forces. His story suggests that while they're opposed on one level, both are agents for change and both necessary in the fight for liberation and racial equality.

The question of the appropriate role of police in minority communities is a pressing one across America as municipalities, in particular, struggle with drug use and joblessness and the crimes they spawn. New York City isn't the only urban area which has turned to increased neighborhood police presence as the answer in a city pundits call "Dodge City".

But Lee's film raises questions of whether the police are instigators of trouble or agents for quelling it. In this film, not only do we sense the deep hostility that idle and bored patrolmen feel toward Black residents, we also witness the pointless murder of a young Black man at the hands of overzealous police called merely to contain a neighborhood disturbance.

In the cataclysmic scene pitting police against screaming neighborhood residents, Mookie tosses a garbage can through the window of Sal's pizza place. His motives are unclear, for we've gotten to know little about what makes him tick despite having noted his ambivalent relations to his boss, his irresponsible behavior toward both Tina, the mother of his little boy, and his sister who helps to support him.

In the closing scenes alone, issues of heroism, community responsibility, police brutality, and the proper role of outsiders in minority neighborhoods are raised. Any one of them would be a rich topic for papers in an English classroom.

All of Lee's movies have been released in video format. This makes it easier to show them in the classroom or at the student center if we want to come closer to replicating a theatre millieu.

And making the transition to an English classroom in which media is an integral part of our curriculum is easier, I believe, if we limit ourselves to short films, at least, at first. Using films of 5-45 minute duration leaves us time for discussion and/or explanation of assignments within the same class period. With a very short film--one of less than 15 minutes--you might show it twice. On second showing, students may see aspects they missed the first time, or you might be more directive the second time by telling them what you want them to give special attention to.

There are various ways of dealing with the content of film in our classrooms. First, we can treat them as literature by teaching students how to disclose and examine aspects such as the nature of the characters and of the setting; the film director's apparent attitude toward the characters; how the particularity of setting is

communicated or how the camera controls the visual impact much as an author's point-of-view controls the reader.

Or, we can use short film and video as complements to the reading experience. Inclusion of social/political issues in readers intended for the secondary, college and adult markets appears to be on the up-swing. This makes it easier for teachers to examine the same issue through different means.

For example, in my own developmental reading classes, after discussion of an essay about the Mongolian government and the myriad governmental family support systems, students look at the twelve minute video, Sari Red which looks at the omnipresent threat of physical violence facing Asian women in their countries. Focusing on content, I sometimes ask students to write one or two paragraphs contrasting the status of women in the video with that presented in the essay.

Still another way in which media can be used is in those classes with a research component. Fact-based films such as What Can You Do With a Nickel? which deals with the first union for day-workers or A Crime to Fit the Punishment which is about efforts to stop production of a controversial labor film, can be starting places for students researching such questions as the history of black-listing in the United States or the current status of labor unions.

Given the current enthusiasm for the entertainment media, whether in the form of videos for at-home consumption or movies seen in theatres, we teachers may be able to harness some of that excitement for our classrooms by bringing short films into our curriculum.

# # #